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If Reagan: Wins...

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, April 14 — President Reagan's decision to use emergency power for funds for El Salvador without the approval of Congress and in its absence during the Easter recess tells us more about the President than anything else.

There is no "emergency" in El Salvador that wasn't there a month ago, and even if there is, the President couldn't help El Salvador much, if at all, in the few days when the members of Congress are back home. This was not a mission of mercy, but a personal Presidential act of defiance of Congress.

So what's going on? An election is going on, that's what. The Great Impersonator is getting ready to run against Congress, with "Give 'em hell" Harry Truman as his latest role model.

Mr. Reagan has an excuse. The Congress has been second-guessing his Presidential authority overseas — maybe more than it should — but it is doing so because it is sincerely concerned that the President's own impulsive first-guessing about military "solutions" in Lebanon and in Central America is not working.

When the Senate and the House force him to withdraw the marines from Lebanon; and the Senate and the House, with the help of the Republicans, vote overwhelmingly against his mining of Nicaraguan harbors; and the British Prime Minister, Mr. Reagan's ideological buddy, condemns the sowing of the mines, and the French President offers to sweep them away — you have to assume that something's wrong, and wonder what the President is doing.

The guess in this corner about why he takes these actions is that it is partly political and partly personal. The more he reads or hears that he's not really in charge of his foreign policy, the more he charges, often against the advice of his own people, and often in the wrong direction.

Whatever they say, Ronald Reagan's got his Irish up. He plunges into Lebanon and orders his battleships to fire into villages against unidentified enemies, and he authorizes the C.I.A. to recruit mercenaries to mine Nicaraguan harbors; he denounces illegal terrorism in the world and uses it himself, and defies the World Court to hold him to account for his actions.

His policy in Lebanon, many of his own people admit, was stupid; his decision to mine harbors in Nicaragua, as Barry Goldwater pointed out, was sneaky. His effort to blame Congress for his failures only assures that he won't get the money he wants for his Central American policy, and even if he wins in November, that he will face a hostile Congress.

Will he win on these deficits at home and abroad? This is the main question of the election. We are told that the mining of the harbors was merely a "holding operation," part of a strategic plan until after the election, when Mr. Reagan would then be free to use U.S. military power to resolve Central American civil wars according to his desires.

Let Mr. Reagan argue this theme to the young people who will have to fight his wars in the Middle East and in Central America. The Wall Street Journal is advising him to stand tall against Congress, the allies and the World Court.

"Mr. Reagan is telling his partisan opponents one thing," says The Journal. "If they want an election over Central America, they can jolly well have one."

This is not a bad idea, but it won't be jolly if the voters take time to think about Mr. Reagan's record in Central America, in Lebanon or about his relations with the allies and the Russians, or if they really think that four more years of Ronald Reagan will be useful if he blames Congress for the failures that seem to have gone to his head.

If Mr. Reagan wins, consider the consequences. He will assume, with good reason, that the people approve of his economic policies at home and his militaristic policies abroad.

More important — maybe the most important issue of all — is that in the next four years the President elected in November will appoint a majority of the members of the present aging Supreme Court of the United States.

Mr. Reagan is not happy with his relations with Congress. He thinks, with some reason, that the War Powers Act limiting his authority is a violation of Presidential power over the conduct of foreign affairs, even a violation of the Constitution. If re-elected, he wants Ed Meese as his Attorney General to appeal his case before a Supreme Court that includes members of his own choosing, a Court that would preside over the law of the land not only until the end of the 80's but probably until the end of the century.

So there are some things for voters to ponder in this election besides who's got the beef or how old Ronald Reagan or Gary Hart really are. The election is not about the past but about the future; not about who's going but about who's coming, and who, if anybody, in this election has a vision of the coming age.

It's clear that in this Republic we face wholly new problems — the decline of old industries and the rise of new technologies, among other things — and also the issue of our relations with the changing world. This is the future we have not heard about from President Reagan, and not very much about from his Democratic opponents.